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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 000314

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SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO GIVES VICTORY SPEECH AND FIERY PRESS
CONFERENCE

REF: MINSK 297

Classified By: Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (SBU) Summary: On March 20, a defiant Aleksandr Lukashenko accepted his presidential &victory8 at a press conference held in the cavernous Palace of the Republic and spoke to a full audience, including practically the entire Belarusian government, on live television. Lukashenko stressed Belarusians had made &a just decision8 and challenged foreign nations to recognize and accept that fact. He claimed the elections were democratic and stoutly refuted international criticisms, using the moment to lambaste the U.S., West, and opposition while promoting his plans for the future. In a rare occasion, Lukashenko took questions from Western and non-state owned press correspondents on live television. The often hardball questions only aggravated more bizarre answers from a clearly disturbed Lukashenko. End Summary.

Lukashenko's Opening Remarks

Belarusians Made Their Choice, Other Countries Should Tend to
Their Own Problems

12. (U) In his March 20 speech at the Palace of the Republic, President Lukashenko announced that the "revolution" that many had prepared for had failed. According to the President, Belarusians had made a wise decision. However, those (opposition leaders) who tried to go behind the backs of the people to get power "from the hands of foreign sponsors" are unable to accept this.

13. (U) Lukashenko said Belarusians respected Americans and citizens of Europe, but that did not mean Belarusians would "alter" themselves to fit Washington's, Brussels', and Warsaw's standards. Belarusians do not need to be told how to live and would not become "servants" to stronger nations. The President opined that countries of the "so-called" color revolutions should first bring order to their own people and rid themselves of poverty and crime. He called color revolutions a "virus" that infects weak countries that have turned a deaf ear to the people and allowed corruption to flourish. Belarus, however, has a strong social policy and a dynamic economy that is developing "for the people" and not for oligarchs.

Elections Were Democratic

14. (U) The President asserted that the March 19 presidential elections were democratic and conducted in strict accordance with Belarus' constitution. Belarusians independently made

their decision and showed the world that they are the "masters" of their home. Lukashenko called the elections an indisputable victory for the people's spirit, satisfaction, and self-esteem, despite foreign and domestic interference that tried to "break" the Belarusians.

15. (U) Lukashenko stressed that foreign countries needed to respect Belarusians' decision as the will of the people and a clear indicator of democracy. According to Lukashenko, the high turnout at the polls showed that Belarusians feel a "deep and personal" responsibility for their government's fate and the welfare of their people. The President lambasted the West for its criticisms of early voting, claiming that the practice existed in "super democracies" such as the U.S. and Germany. The GOB ensured the necessary conditions for a fair democratic vote and allowed 1,200 international and 30,000 domestic observers and 1,000 journalists to monitor.

Opposition Does Not Respect Its People

16. (U) Lukashenko declared that Belarus had never seen such unprecedented pressure and anti-Belarusian behavior as the opposition had presented. The President viewed it as the opposition's high level of disrespect to its own people and failure to recognize their right to an independent election. However, the opposition's actions with the help of foreign pressure resulted in almost all Belarusians supporting the regime in the "moment of truth."

The President's New Mission

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17. (U) Lukashenko said the election results showed Belarusians' support for his approach to building a strong, developing country. He said his next mission was his five-year plan that would build a government for the people. The President stated that Belarus is not as rich as the people would like, but it was just a question of time and labor before Belarusians would attain or even exceed Western European standards of living.

18. (U) Belarus will continue its peaceful policies and strengthen relations with its neighbors. He noted a union with Russia is of high strategic importance to Belarus, but stressed dialogue with the U.S. and EU was also important.

Journalists Toss Lukashenko Tough Questions

19. (U) In a rare event, Belarusian TV provided continuous live coverage of Lukashenko's press conference with western and independent journalists, as well as with state journalists. The western and independent journalists posed many tough, if not embarrassing questions to the President. However, the audience was overwhelmingly comprised of GOB officials, state journalists, and pro-Lukashenko election monitors. All of Lukashenko's answers were greeted with broad applause.

On Demonstrators

110. (U) Q (Liberacion): You (Lukashenko) said on March 17 that you would wring the necks of opponents who would go to the streets. What happened to them and can you give them security guarantees?

A: To wring the necks? I see your neck is all right, just as everyone else's. (Laughter from audience) So do not be concerned.

Q (RIA Novosti): If you were sure of your victory and are confident it was democratic, why was it necessary to deport foreign observers and detain representatives of the opposition?

A: I do not know who was arrested or detained. The law is the law for everyone, and if someone violated the law, then they will be prosecuted. I know that a few people were detained, but they asked for it to save their face after realizing nothing would come of their actions.

Q (BBC News): If so many people voted for you, why do you think thousands of people came to the streets to protest your victory?

A: This proves the democratic nature of our society. We have people who do not agree with the president's policy(Did you see the people who came to the square yesterday? Could you distinguish between the participants and bystanders? (The demonstrators) are 14 and 15-year-olds who were paid BYR 20,000 (USD 10) to participate. They then blamed the authorities for the weather. You can see that God was with the Belarusian people yesterday. A terrible snow blizzard was observed only on that square.

On the Elections

¶11. (U) Q (Associated Press): What is your reaction to opposition leaders' demands to hold a repeat election?

A: If they want to have a repeat vote, let them go and vote. There will be no reaction from my part. I only react to the results and the reaction voiced by the Central Election Commission.

Q (GOB's telegraph news Belta): It is evident the West and U.S. will not recognize the election. There are lots of example of what happened to countries that attempted to oppose the White House. Do you think Belarus faces a threat of international isolation?

A: Judging by the words of U.S. politicians and others that you mentioned, we have lived in international isolation for a long time already(I wish we could continue our development at the same pace in this isolation. If they (the U.S. and West) respect Belarusians, as they always say, they will change their policies. I am not afraid of any further isolation. I do not understand how one can isolate a country

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that is the heart of Europe, through which 100 million tons of goods are shipped annually. Neither the Europeans, Russians, nor the Kazakhs have ever experienced any problems here(.We will preserve the country like this at any cost. They will stage provocations every day and will (claim) to act in accordance with the Bible. We will show the absurdity of their policies being carried out in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Russian Support

¶12. (U) Journalist (state newspaper Narodnaya Gazeta): Mr. Lukashenko, the Russian authorities have supported your candidacy(

Lukashenko: Did you hear this? Where did you get this fact? I am an official, so do not use rumors in public. Excuse me for interrupting you, but I will tell you and the West that Putin is not backing Lukashenko. An analyst says that the Belarusian economy is developing so successfully because we buy Russian oil at friendly prices and sell it to the West at international prices. I want you to know, and Euronews above all, that we buy oil from Russia at higher than world

prices(I do not need any support from Russia, though I am confident I would receive it if I asked.

Lukashenko Is An Emancipator

¶13. (U) Q (Interfax): Thanks to your election rivals, this country has learned interesting things about your private life and sons. Are you going to charge these individuals for libel? And, basically, will Milinkevich and Kozulin be sent to prison?

A: I would hate to see anyone sent to prison, but believe me, I do not send people to prison. Under the constitution, I release people, and as any other president I have the power to pardon people(if they are guilty, they will be sent to prison. As far as I am concerned, they will not be sent to prison for personal reasons. I will oppose this and will ask law-enforcement agencies not to touch them. Let God go with them, as it is all coming to them(I do not think the public has learned too many things about my private life. What they said is horrible...they were destroying my image with the help of spin-doctors.

Lukashenko Gets Cheeky With Ukrainian Journalist

¶14. (U) Journalist (Antena TV, Ukraine): Several events have happened over the last few weeks here that were viewed as scandalous. Some of our politicians were not allowed into Belarus and some of my colleagues were barred from entering this conference. My colleague was arrested when reporting live at an opposition rally(

Lukashenko: During a live broadcast?

Journalist: She was reporting by phone

Lukashenko: You need only this. This is good when you are detained reporting live. Your television does not need better facts.

Journalist: May I finish (the question)?

Lukashenko: As you wish. You are the master. You can finish if you want.

Journalist: Sometimes you speak about Ukraine in a slightly negative context(

Lukashenko: No, no, excuse me. You did not allow me to finish. I respect my opposition because they found my Ukrainian roots. (Passage omitted: Lukashenko recalls working with Ukrainians on a collective farm and claims Belarus supports Ukrainian farmers during the harvesting campaign.) Probably, she was not arrested but detained, because it is not so easy to arrest a person. She was probably doing something wrong. So when in this country, you should abide by this country's laws.

Comment

¶15. (C) The setting of Lukashenko's press conference showed a leader far removed from the people. He sat at a large desk, flanked by two large flags centered high on a large stage,

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isolated from the packed auditorium. His curt answers to Western journalists and scolding of Belarusian correspondents only helped to show the world his bizarre behavior, yet he still received healthy applause from his well-chosen audience and foreign lackeys) including American citizen Michael Margulis, whom Lukashenko repeatedly mentioned during his remarks as representing the real American people.

¶16. (C) The press conference rivaled his firebrand speech at the UNGA. Lukashenko used this rare moment with Western journalists to criticize the U.S. and accuse it, along with the rest of the West, of murdering Slobodan Milosivic and unjustly removing Saddaam Hussein. At one disturbing moment, Lukashenko told a journalist she was jumping to conclusions when thinking that his third term as President would be his last. This clearly demonstrated a defiant Lukashenko intends to stay in power indefinitely and sees no reason to change his course.

Krol